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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

Winifred Wilson

ENTITLED Octave Thamer as a Short Story Writer

IS APPROVED BY ME AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF A B. with Honors in English

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English

1918
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OCTAVE THANET
AS
A WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

BY

WINIFRED WILSON

THESIS

FOR THE

DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

IN

ENGLISH

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

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OCTAVE THANET AS A WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

The half century which has intervened between the ending of the Civil War and the present day has been filled full to overflowing with a tremendous spirit of growth - growth in business, in commerce, in science, in every human enterprise. These are developments which, in a certain sense, are quite material and tangible. There are, however, some developments of this last half century which are not tangible, they can only be felt, and their presence recognized. The rise of a strong sense of nationalism is just such a development. To quote from Professor Pattee concerning the spirit of nationalism and the effect that it has produced upon the literature of our country : "The war destroyed sectionalism and revealed the nation to itself. After the tremendous reality of war, it demanded genuineness and the truth of life.....America shaken from narrow sectionalism and contemplation of Europe, woke up and discovered America. In a kind of astonishment she wandered from section to section of her own land, discovering everywhere peoples and manners and languages that were as strange to her even as foreign lands. Cable told of the romance of the Creoles and of the picturesque descendants of the Arcadians on the bayous of Louisiana; Page and Harris and F.H. Smith and others caught

a vision of the romance of the old South;.....and Miss French of the dwellers in the canebrakes of Arkansas..... In twenty years every isolated neighborhood in America had had its chronicler and photographer."¹

We realize that from the statement just quoted from Mr. Patte, that he regards all of the realistic work done by these authors just mentioned, as a direct result of this awakened spirit of nationalism. To go one step farther than Professor Patte, however, we may say that it is this desire of self-revelation on the part of the nation which gives not only the work of these famous men and women, but the men and women themselves, for it is ever true that the authors of any given age are largely the embodiment of the spirit of the times. Of all the writers who might be termed products of this new era, an era set in motion by a spirit of nationalism, none is more worthy of a detailed study, both in matters that relate to personality and those that deal with technique, than is Alice French, or Octave Thanet, to use her pen-name. Numerous reasons can be found to justify this statement. First, Octave Thanet is practically the only writer of note who has ever attempted to portray and interpret the lives of the poor white trash, the decayed planters, and the ignorant negroes who live in the swampy cane brakes and the dismal forests of Arkansas. Second, she has given us a series of most life-like character studies of people she has known in the crude, yet energetic and

1. A. History of American Literature Since 1850, Fred Lewis Patte
New York, 1915.

vigorous small towns of the Middle West. Third, she is one of the few writers who have known how to present labor problems to her readers at large in a way that has really interested them. Fourth, she is one of the writers who, by constant and clever use of the short story form, have made it possible for critics to say with some degree of conviction that the short story has come into its own. It is for these reasons and for others which will make themselves apparent in subsequent pages, that we would make a study of the stories of Octave Thanet, paying especial attention to those stories that have been written as a direct answer to a nation-wide desire of Americans to know themselves.

II BIOGRAPHY

Before we take up the study of Octave Thanet's stories, with all their accompanying details of technique, let us know something about the author herself, her life, and her personality, as we expect to find it mirrored in her work. This biography may include a study of her parents, her home, her education, her personal appearance, her tastes, her pleasures, her interests - everything that may in any way give us a glimpse of the real Octave Thanet, the Octave Thanet we shall seek in her stories.

To speak of Miss French's birthplace, her earliest home and her parentage, takes us from the Middle West, the scene of her literary labors, to the quaint old New England town of Andover, Massachusetts, where in 1850 she was born. Her ancestors on both sides belong to such well-known and historic families of New England and Virginia, as the Mortons, the Lees, and the Endicotts, Mr. French being a descendant of William French, the colonial legislator and Indian fighter. At the age of five, Miss French's parents moved to Davenport, Iowa. For her formal education, she was sent back to the famous Andover Academy, the same seminary which the Grandmother French had attended when a child. It must not be thought, however, that her education was confined to training received here, for as one critic has said, "Miss French believes in the dedication of an author to his art and that he must spend some years in preparatory study and travel. Her own preparation was masculine in its breadth, because one of the aims of her life has been to keep intellectual pace

with her brothers. She made great explorations into the French, German, and English literatures; diligently studied the German metaphysicians for the sake of cultivating her reasoning powers, and learned to love the masters of political economy. But, on the other hand, her uncle, Bishop Lee's, and later, Bishop Perry's ecclesiastical libraries have been ransacked for 'the sermons of old English divines.'" ¹

And now what type of woman is it who would be willing to undertake this rigorous preparation in order to master the craftsmanship of her art? One writer says, "In appearance she reflects that invisible sun that lights up the countenance with placidity and in merrier moments twinkles in the eyes and breaks up the features into curves and dimples, index of a fine loving spirit within. In manner she is easy and courteous, with a readiness of speech, through which 'the minds all gentle graces shine!'" ²

And then, again to quote from Miss Reid's article:

"Octave Thanet is an exceptional woman, the old-fashioned Anglo-Saxon phrase, "many-sided" expressing her traits with more vividness than the Latin word versatile. She does not belong to that over-sensitive spiritual type, best represented in our age by Christiana Rossetti and Emily Dickinson, but rather to the Thackeray and Kingsley type. By this comparison it is not to be inferred that she is lacking either in womanliness or spirituality, but that she loves human life and intercourse, and watches with an ever-increasing

1. The Writer We Know as "Octave Thanet", Mary J. Reid (From a clipping loaned by the Davenport Public Library - date unknown)
2. Des Moines Register-Leader, (From a clipping loaned by the Davenport Public Library - date unknown)

interest our provincial vanity, our cosmopolitan valuation, our daring, our reckless humor and secret tenderness, our vigor and our divine hopefulness. Her fair complexion, fathomless blue eyes, light brown hair, and also her tender conscience and love of learning ally her to New England; her manners, speech, and magnificent physique are Southern, while her humorous mouth and vigorous practical mind bespeak her a daughter of the West. A long residence at the South and a study of the various dialects have somewhat affected her pronunciation. This little peculiarity is not to be regretted at all, since it greatly adds to the charm of her conversation. Miss French's manners are indescribably charming. She is always very approachable, but is sometimes as elusive as a wild bird about betraying her real self to a stranger. Her tact is marvelous. I have never known her to go beyond the occasion or to rise above the intelligence of the person with whom she was conversing. She is very fond of children, particularly of her three nephews and nieces....Among intimate friends where she feels herself at home, she is the soul of a dinner-party. Her memory is very retentive and holds everything from Emersonian maxims to the latest doggerel verse. She tells a story capitally, easily dropping into a dialect if it will add to the humor of the narrative, and is remarkably quick at repartee. After a brilliant social season one will find Octave Thanet hard at work in the charming little home on the Clover Bend plantation in Arkansas.....If a drowning mill-hand is to be resuscitated or an artery is severed, she is invariably sent for, as she knows exactly what ought to be

done until the doctor arrives." ¹

The paragraph that has just been quoted, began with a statement that Octave Thanet was an exceptional woman, the old fashioned Anglo-Saxon phrase, "many-sided" best expressing her characteristics. It then continues to stress this point again and again. In fact, almost every article that has been written about Octave Thanet, stresses this point. The following quotation is typical of many that might be cited:

"Octave Thanet's personality is of that character which appeals to enthusiastic admiration, and she makes friends easily by reason of a fusion of qualities more or less rare in her sex - judgment, tact, sympathy, tolerance, and tenderness - with true feminine fondness for all those things in social life which distinguish the gentlewoman. Society makes large demands upon her time and whether in Chicago, Indianapolis, Memphis, New York, or Boston, Miss French necessarily responds to its exactions, so that one wonders how she finds time to accomplish her literary work. A striking phase of Octave Thanet's kaleidoscopic quality is the possession of a keen sense of the genuinely humorous, an attribute commonly ascribed to the exclusive possession of man - humor which "softens with mirth the inequalities of existence", of which we have striking proof in the testimony of one of her intimate acquaintances. "It is impossible to convey in words the impression she makes upon one; her humor and pathos are both elusive, and exist largely in her personality and manner. One can no more catch

1. The Writer We Know as Octave Thanet, Mary J. Reid (From a clipping loaned by the Davenport Public Library - date unknown)

and cage them for inspection than one can cage the fragrance of wild grape blossoms in spring, or the rollicking "chink" of the bob o'link, rioting in June meadows." ¹

It seems rather strange that critics in speaking of Octave Thanet's personality should so often seek for comparisons with wild flowers or with old-fashioned gardens. Surely it must be that only things of nature can suggest the sweet, dainty refinement, the elusive humor and pathos of Miss French's character. To quote another sentence that illustrates well this point,

"She returned to Andover to complete her schooling and bore thence a spicy independence of character, which, like the pungent fragrance of lavender and mint, whose odors haunt the old-time gardens, clings naturally to a descendant of the Endicott, Winthrop, Winslow, Phillips, and Danforth families." ²

So far, the quotations have been chosen from newspaper or magazine articles and represent, for the most part, impressions of various authors or reporters who have visited the French home. It is but natural that we should ask ourselves, how do the people of her home city feel about Octave Thanet? In the first place, they are very proud of her and her work and are extremely anxious to have her known as a Davenport writer. In spite of the fact that she may more nearly be termed a cosmopolite than an Iowan, for born in the

1. Davenport Democrat, Oct. 2, '04. (From a clipping loaned by the Davenport Public Library)

2. Des Moines Register Leader, Addie B. Billington, (From a clipping loaned by the Davenport Public Library - no date given)

East, receiving her education at Andover, spending much of her time in Boston of late years, and retreating to Clover Bend, Arkansas, when winter approaches, she has had but little time really to live in Davenport. However true this may be, no man or woman from Davenport will ever admit it. They claim her as their own.

In the second place, all of these people who have ever lived in Davenport and have known Miss French, seem to cherish a genuine affection for her. They love to speak of her quiet dignity, her gracious manner, and her great social charm; they never tire of telling about the old French home - the exquisite and tasteful furnishings, the quiet subdued colors, the art treasures, and the valuable collections of antique furniture; they like to talk of the friendship which exists between Octave Thanet and Mrs. Crawford, her chosen friend and companion. So close is the friendship of these two women that they have built a beautiful, old-fashioned southern home on the Clover Bend plantation, naming it Thanford - a combination of their names. Here, as at Davenport, she spends her time with her friends, her books, and her writing; but in the midst of her busy life finds time for a host of hobbies, such as rowing, automobiling, and driving. She likes carpenter work, and is a fair amateur cabinet maker. She also takes delight in amateur photography. To have such a list of pleasures published after her name can mean but one thing - Octave Thanet must be a healthy, vigorous, alert, wide-awake woman. This supposition is strengthened when we find such statements as these,

"When she began to outgrow her dolls she became absorbed in riding, rowing, and driving. With the increased physical strength as a result of her life in the open, came greater powers of endurance. Thirty-odd miles an afternoon to a wild hog hunt was no uncommon occurrence for her in those days, nor was leaping brooks, perhaps a spill, but always in at the death, was the venture-some girl."¹

Concerning her ability as a cabinet maker just mentioned above, we find this reference,

"Miss French's carpenter shop is one of the attractions of Thanford. Her hand has been guided in its cunning by the teaching of a German master builder, an artist in his line, and she has successfully wrought carved tables, chairs, chests, towel racks, and other articles in which use and beauty join."²

Yet another interest, frequently mentioned by her friends, is her love of fine cooking and beautiful service. It seems that these have been among her hobbies since girlhood, for although the Frenchs were people of means and culture, their home life was very simple and sensible and Alice early learned the art of cooking.

Such then is the composite portrait that presents a most interesting and at the same time a most lovable personality. Who can resist the desire to know something about the work she has done? Are her stories as full of life and vigor as we could expect them to be? Is she as sympathetic in her interpretation of the lives of people about her as a

1. Des Moines Capital, (From a clipping loaned by the Davenport Public Library - no date given)

2. Des Moines Register-Leader (From a clipping loaned by the Davenport Public Library - no date given)

study of her personality would lead us to expect? These are some of the numberless questions that we are asking ourselves.

The best method to be used in searching for the answers, is to make a study of her literary work. In taking up this examination, however, we intend to confine ourselves to but one branch of her work, and that, the great number of short stories she has written. The reasons for such a limitation are two: first, it is in this field that she has done the largest, and at the same time, best part of her work; second, as was once before stated, Octave Thanet is one of the writers who answering the call of an awakened spirit of nationalism, has by means of a series of local color short stories, helped to make the short story what it is today.

III SETTING

In considering the technique of Octave Thanet's short stories, we may well study her mastery of setting, characterization, plot, and ethical purpose. We will look at the setting first, for not only does this furnish a background, a stage as it were, for any action that take place, but it also illustrates one of the cardinal principles of all short story writing - the rule that every word in a short story must count. As applied to setting, this rule means that no time can be given to lengthy descriptions as such, and every detail mentioned must serve a purpose. Let us now examine several of Octave Thanet's settings to see with what skill she has formed her descriptions, and with what art she has set the stage for her actors. The first paragraph that has been chosen comes from the Captured Dream. This is a most charming description; it not only presents a most effective background for the little old lady that is soon to appear, but it is a setting that by means of most carefully chosen details possesses the power to give added depth, significance, and beauty to the characters themselves. It serves to give us what critics call "atmosphere", without which much of the charm of the story would be lost. The description itself, as seen apart from the story, presents a most realistic and at the same time, most fascinating picture of the "parlor" of a middle west farm house.

"The carpet was soft to the foot, covered with a jungle of flowers and green leaves - the pattern of carpet which fashion leaves behind for disappointed salesmen to mark lower

and lower, until it shall be pushed into the ranks of shop worn bargains. The cheap paper on the wall was delicately tinted, but this boon plainly came from the designers, and not the taste of the buyer, since there was a simply terrible chair that swayed by machinery, and had four brilliant lines of plush to vex the eye, besides a paroxysm of embroidery and lace, to which was still attached the red badge of courage of the county fair. More embroidery figured on the cabinet organ and two tables, and another red ticket peeped coyly from under the ornate frame of a pastel landscape displaying every natural beauty - forest, mountain, sunlit lake, and meadow - at their bluest and greenest. There were three other pictures in the room - two very large colored photographs, one of a lad of twelve, the other of a pretty girl who might be sixteen, in a white gown, with a roll of parchment in her hand tied with a blue ribbon; and the photograph of a cross of flowers."¹

Who is there that knows the "parlor" of the middle west farm house, who would be willing to part with a single detail! Even the person who has never seen such a room is perfectly fascinated by this description. Only the hand of an artist could paint such a "chamber of horrors" and then by the simple entrance of a little old lady and her husband transform the scene into that of a real home.

The next quotations display a most commonplace setting - merely a view from the laundry window. But note the skill with which these few details have been selected. Two windows, some

1. "The Captured Dream", Book of True Lovers, New York, 1899, p.267

morning glory vines, and a cherry tree are all that appear, and yet one can fairly feel the fresh cool breeze as it comes in little waves through the dewy, rustling morning glories!

"The laundry had two south windows, - the windows and doors being covered with wire against which the lavish morning glory vines were tapping softly, gorgeous bells of purple, and red, not yet shrunken by the sun. Morning or afternoon it was always shady under the laundry windows, because of the great cherry tree which glittered now with little dots of flame." ¹

In this setting we have felt the cool fresh breeze of the early morning. The desired effect was gained through the power of suggestion. The same is true of the next description. This time we feel the hot, moist air of the kitchen; we see the kettle steaming; we look longingly out through the door to the valley beyond.

"If the kitchen-door stand open - and the door of an Arkansas kitchen is likely to stand open on a late February day - you can look from the kettles of the big stove to the bend of the Black River, to the steep bank where red willow twigs top the velvet down." ²

We like this description because of the sense of absolute realism which it gives us. We can not help feeling that when Octave Thanet sketched that vignette, an actual

1. "A Jealous Woman", A Slave to Duty and Other Women, Chicago, 1898, p. 90.

2. "The Loaf of Peace", Otto the Knight and Other Trans-Mississippi Stories, Boston, 1893, p. 160.

Scene was in her mind - a little view which at one time or another has been caught by her eye, and which has been stored away in the treasure house of her memory, awaiting the time when it could be shared with us. Only a writer who had some clearly defined picture in her mind, could offer us the two following companion pictures - the one of the small town in winter, the other, a similar scene in summer. They are given without further comment. The one of winter:

"A silver rime glistened all down the street. There was a drabble of dead leaves on the sidewalk which was of wood, and on the roadway which was of macadam and stiff mud. The wind blew sharply for it was a December day and only six in the morning." ¹

That of summer:

"Harry had come up on the cars, and was resting a moment on his piazza before cleaning himself for supper. He was tired with a hard, warm, dirty day's work; and he waited a moment in a pleasant daze, conscious of the splash of the improvised hose fountain on the green plush of the tiny lawn, of the rich colors of the cannas in the pyramid near the house, of the shifting of the burnished greens of the oak trees under a light breeze, of the soft blending and melting of many lines in the angles made on either hand by the shady street before him, of the flowers and shrubs in the yard and the fanciful architecture of the wooden houses, of the rattle of passing vehicles over the brick pavement, and the noiseless flash of bicycles." ²

1. "The Besetment of Kurt Lieders", Stories of a Western Town, N.Y. 1893

2. "The Way of an Election", The Heart of Toil, N.Y. 1898, p. 47

After reading descriptions like these, we are not surprised to find a French author making this statement - "It is only since I have myself visited the West and New South of the United States that I have been able to realize fully the minute fidelity in the description of things and people which make each of the short stories of Octave Thanet a little masterpiece of honest and piquant realism."¹ This same article goes on to say, that Madame Blance even made use of Octave Thanet's book as guides to a complete understanding of the western town. This might well be, for in her series of short stories, Octave Thanet has taken up practically every phase of village life. There are two

instances when she has even described such a difficult setting as a village funeral. In the first, she has caught in a few words the very heart of such a scene. Marcia was so dazed that she seemed to be drifting. "There was a creaking of straps, a slight bustle among the men."² To most of us, those few motions that Octave Thanet has suggested are exactly the ones that impress us when we ourselves are standing by an open grave.

The second description is somewhat longer, but it is just as simple and dignified as the first:

"The little yard of Timothy's house was filled with them. They overflowed the little piazza where Tim used to sit of an evening in the rocking-chair with the red

1. "Octave Thanet", Book Buyer, Vol. 13, p. 293.

2. "Judgment on Mrs. Swift", Book of True Lovers, New York, 1899, p. 45

cushion and smoke over his paper; they filled the lawn which had been his pride, and the gravel path between the carefully tended rose-trees and geraniums." ¹

A description like that makes one feel the warm, broad, and sincere heart-beat of true human life that fills her stories from one end to the other.

The quotations which have been included in this first group are of scenes that are more or less familiar to us all. The next division of her stories deals with the swampy forests of Arkansas - districts not so well known, but just as vividly presented. No better proof of her art in describing the Arkansas canebrake can be found than in the following:

"Indeed, a cypress-brake, in winter, is more than desolate; it has a sinister mystery about it, like the scene of a forgotten horror, with its uncanny growth of knees, and stumps, and blotched hack-berry trunks; and the wind sulking amid the stripped branches; no ripple, only haunting shadows of the ruined forest. Strange shapes waver in the water, elusive, monstrous; they are not tree-column or cypress knees; they are the awful unspeakable secrets of the forest, telling themselves in pictures." ²

Equally interesting, perhaps more exciting, and certainly a bit more melodramatic is the following:

"An atrocious crime had been as atrociously revenged.

1. "What Man Can do", Harpers, Vol. 104, p. 205.

2. We All, New York, 1913, p. 134.

Long as the volunteer executioners might live they would remember the look of the blazing white disk, sinking through a smoldering sunset, behind the cypress-trees; the dark open space in the forest, with its winter-stung grass trampled by horse's hoofs into stiff mud; the horses incuriously grazing; the grim ring of men; the long shadows of the water-oaks and maples and gum trees walling the 'slash'; the inky blackness of the water in the 'slash' - save where it caught one horrible, wavering glow, not from the sun but from the dying flames." ¹

Lest we should come to feel that all of Octave Thanet's forest descriptions are uniformly gloomy and sad and have about them a mysterious atmosphere of dread, let us note this quite different setting taken from Ma' Bowlin.

"The road to the 'big bayou' was mostly under water. An opalescent mist rose from the open spaces toward the west, through which blazed a sea of gold. The forest was in blossom, sumptuous petals of wild-plum flowers or dog-wood drifted among the trees. Aloft was a twitter of birds and bird happiness, drowned for a second by the splash of hurrying hoofs, but instantly reasserting itself and rippling keenly and blithely through the wood." ²

We have now quoted and discussed a number of settings from each of the two divisions of Octave Thanet's work -

1. "Beyond the Limit", Cosmopolitan, Vol. 34, p. 451

2. "Ma' Bowlin", Knitters in the Sun, Boston, 1893, p. 251

first, the local color, short-story of the middle West and, second, that of the region near Clover Bend, Arkansas. In some, we have pointed out their sense of realism, their absolute truth to life; in others, we have seen the part that setting may be made to play in bringing out the dominant mood of a story - or even in portraying some character; in still others, we have noted with what rare skill the author has chosen the details of her descriptions - so that not one can be eliminated without a resultant loss in the effect as a whole.

And yet when all of that has been said and done, have we really answered one of the most important questions of all - Why is it that the scenes which Octave Thanet has given us, remain fixed in our memories long after the story itself may have been finished and the book laid aside? Why do we remember the little old-fashioned parlor of The Captured Dream, or the scene of Tim's funeral, or the desolate swampy forests? And why is it that we pay more than a passing glance to such a description as this:

"Alan and Sally had gamboled on the lounge as babies, and coasted down its sleek leather-covered arms as children, and reclined on it covered with the afghan whenever they were ill enough for cossetings, but not ill enough for bed and doses. Dainties, and nice drinks, and oranges were privileges of the lounge. Mamma always read to the lounge, and papa would tell stories or play cards and chess. And of what consequence was it that two of the springs were broken?" 1

1. We All, New York, 1913, p. 146.

The writer believes that the answer to all of the questions asked above is to be found in this last simple little description. First let us ask ourselves, "How many of us have not known some such piece of family furniture? Perhaps it in no way resembled Sally's and Alan's lounge, and yet it was something that meant just as much to us as the lounge did to them. Thus it was that when Octave Thanet wrote this description, she was really describing something that is familiar to us all - in other words, she gained our ready attention by first touching our hearts. As we look back over the descriptions which have just been quoted, we perceive that she has ever followed the rule of telling her readers either about something they already know, or else about something they would like very much to know. In doing this, she has recognized the value of this couplet from Emerson.

"Tell men what they knew before,
Paint the prospect from the door."

In other words, this couplet means, give the people what they want, tell them about something they already know and they will experience the same sense of pleasure that they feel when they suddenly discover some old but favored book, or some ancient and "all but falling in pieces" suit of clothes or party frock.

Octave Thanet, however, does more than this. She not only paints for us the scenes we know and understand, but she permeates the whole with the charm of her own personality. A setting that might seem sordid and ugly to a casual

observer, becomes transmuted by the light of her sympathetic interpretation. Octave Thanet understood the old man and his quiet wife in The Captured Dream and her description of the parlor is a masterpiece. She knew and appreciated the gloomy Arkansas swamps, and she leaves an indelible impression of their horrible awfulness upon our minds. Again, she understood the life of the working man with all its joys and sorrows, and we are given that quiet, simple, dignified description of Timothy's funeral. Surely, these three descriptions are sufficient to mark her work as that of a true artist.

To summarize the points that have just been made with reference to the technique of Octave Thanet's settings we may note:

1. They sound realistic and true to life because she tells us about actual scenes.
2. She makes every word, every detail count.
3. She understands the use of suggestion.
4. She frequently uses settings to bring out the dominant mood of the story or to portray character.
5. She described scenes that all of us can readily recognize, for she transforms every one of them by her own sympathetic interpretation. Thus making the unreal seem real.
6. She herself is truly interested in people and in their natural environment, and thus she is easily able to interest us in their surroundings.

IV CHARACTER

When we turn from our study of her management of setting to her power in handling characterization, we have a phase of her work that is worthy of even more detailed study. But before we proceed to a study of her power of characterization as revealed in her stories, let us pause to note one of her criticisms concerning the delineation of the dramatis personae of the short story:

"The subject of character must be understood.

The writer must have a clear idea of what she is going to write and must do her characters justice. She must look at people as their Creator looks at them, see them as they see themselves, and at the same time as others see them. She must make them of interest. People are never stupid to themselves. It is only to other people that they appear so." ¹

To look at people as their Creator looks at them, to see them as they see themselves, and at the same time as others see them, implies a sympathy so great as to be almost boundless. We ask at once for the sources from which she draws her material. Are her characters fictitious, or are they real people? Mary Jane Reid says Octave Thanet once gave her the following humorous answer when she asked where she obtained the characters and incidents of her stories.

"I should have to draw entirely upon my imagination

1. Davenport Democrat. Jan. 16, '09.

to tell you how I obtained my materials. Sometimes an incident suggests the character and sometimes the characters suggest their own incidents. In fact, they have a sad trick of taking their destinies in their own hands. There was Colonel Rutherford in Expiation, for instance, a gentleman whom I hold in high regard. I expected him to be a faithful and inconsolable husband of one wife, and he was happily living with his fourth before my acquaintance with him ended. I was so fond of him that it was a cruel blow to me; but I simply had no influence at all with him, and he went his own gait in spite of me. 'Meadows', in The Day of the Cyclone, I found all over what we call in the river counties 'The Slough Water Districts' of Iowa, and all over Kansas. I think he is a fine old Roman, but he would probably despise me as a writer of stories and a trifler. I like the dear old man just the same."

According to Miss Reid, Miss French's own love of old furniture is the source upon which she draws for material in the character of Mrs. Finley.

In this same article Miss Reid also points out to us that Jane in The Adventure in Photography is Mrs. Crawford, Miss French's chosen friend and companion, and that the three stories, The Loaf of Peace, Trusty No. 49, and Expiation all owe their existence to characters that Octave Thanet had known at Clover Bend, Arkansas.

1. "The Writer We Know as Octave Thanet", Mary J. Reid (From a clipping loaned by the Davenport Public Library - date unknown)

From the quotations that have been made, we may learn three things - first, that Octave Thanet regards the problem of characterization as most worthy of a serious study,- second, that she has a feeling of actual interest and fondness for the people she creates, - third, that many of her characters have been drawn from real life.

Let us now turn to the study of her characterization from the point of view of technique, a study which will attempt to formulate the principles upon which Octave Thanet works. How is it possible for her to have created such a great number of flesh and blood creatures, creatures that can react as if in real life to the situations with which they are confronted? Suppose it is true that many of her characters have been drawn from life, what methods has she used in making them live again in the pages of her stories?

1. Does she make her characters act?
2. Does she make her characters talk?
3. Does she take care to employ especially apt, well-turned, and easily remembered descriptive phrases?

To begin with the first principle, that of making her characters act, we notice that most of our own general impressions of people are obtained from the every day world about us. We watch them as they perform their simple duties, we see them as they react to unusual circumstances, or we hear about them from the lips of others. These are the methods of which Octave Thanet makes use in her delineation of character, and as a result, she seldom finds it necessary

to make use of long descriptions. For instance, note how simply and yet how effectively the three characters Heriette, from The Cabinet Organ, Abbylonia, from When Abbylonia Surrendered, and Sist' Lily Pearl, found in The Terrors of the Law, have been described by an observance of just these principles. In the first two, we are allowed to see the characters themselves as they react to the situations about them - in the last, we see Sist' Lily Pearl through the eyes of her long-suffering negro brethern.

In the example chosen from The Cabinet Organ, we first hear the discordant sounds that come pealing forth from the neighbor's new organ - next we see the set lips of Heriette drawing tighter and tighter, and then -

"Henriette, spoke not again, she strode out of the room, and did even as she had threatened. She flung Pauline's brush straight at the organist sitting before the window." ¹

We need no foot notes to explain why it was that Henriette could so successfully domineer over her two younger sisters.

In the second instance, the description begins:

"Abbylonia Eddings, wife to the Reverend Eli Eddings, was always tired of a Monday afternoon, but never had she been so exhausted, soul and body, as she was one Monday in March. She stood in the tired woman's attitude, her knuckles on her hips, and gazed wearily about the kitchen. 'Just slicked up!' sighed Abbylonia. 'Well it's the best I can do, with

1. "The Cabinet Organ", The Missionary Sheriff, New York, 1989, p. 68

this back." ¹

Surely, there is no one who cannot appreciate the utter weariness and despair that lies hidden in that one simple act of Abbylonia as she places her hands upon her hips and gazes wearily about the kitchen.

The third example, the character of Sist' Lily Pearl illustrates an extremely clever use of the fact that in real life many of our impressions of the people about us are gained from the lips of others. In this story after a short introduction in which we learn that the ministry of Sister Lily Pearl is no longer desired by her negro brethern, we hear them discuss a series of sermons that she has been preaching on the Ten Commandments. Not until the very end of the story, are we allowed to see Sist' Lily Pearl herself and even then it is just to emphasize the impressions that have already been made from the remarks of the various brethern concerning these sermons.

Of Sist' Lily Pearl's sermon on the "Third Commandment", one of the church members says:

"Third Commandmint we natchelly didn't epec' no harm of; but ayfter de fust Godly words 'bout profane swearing, if she didn't git on to false swearing befo' the gran' jury. 'bout crap shootin', en git us all turrible oncomfortable." ²

The three examples which have just been given,

1. "When Abbylonia Surrendered", Book of True Lovers, p. 169
2. "The Terrors of the Law", Century, Vol. 68, p. 258.

The first thing I noticed when I stepped out of the car was the cold. It was a sharp contrast to the warm blanket I had been sitting under. I shivered slightly, pulling the coat tighter around me. The air smelled crisp and clean, a welcome change from the stale air of the car.

I looked up at the sky, where a few stars were beginning to peek through the darkening clouds. The moon was a thin, pale crescent, hanging in the vastness of the night. It felt like I was looking into a giant, dark eye.

The silence was profound. There were no cars, no voices, no sounds of the city. It was a complete hush, a quiet that felt almost oppressive. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the cold air. It felt like I was drinking from a well of pure, unadulterated nature.

I started walking, my feet crunching on the snow-covered ground. The path was well-trodden, but the snow was soft and gave under my weight. I felt a sense of freedom, a sense of being alone in a beautiful, quiet world.

The trees were bare, their branches reaching out like skeletal fingers against the dark sky. Some were covered in a thick layer of snow, while others were still dark and gnarled. The contrast between the white and the black was striking.

I walked for what felt like hours, though it might have been only minutes. The cold was still there, but it wasn't as harsh now. It was a gentle reminder of the season, a whisper of winter's presence.

I stopped for a moment, looking back over my shoulder. The path I had taken was now a trail of footprints in the snow, leading me away from the car and into the heart of the woods. I felt a sense of adventure, a sense of discovery.

The night was so beautiful, so peaceful. It was a perfect moment, a perfect escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. I took another deep breath, savoring the cold air. It was a gift, a moment of pure joy in a world that was often so busy and so full of noise.

I continued walking, my mind wandering. I thought about the things I had seen, the things I had felt. It was all so new, so different. I felt like I had discovered a secret, a hidden world that was just waiting for me to find it.

The stars were now more visible, their light shining brightly through the dark. The moon was still there, a constant presence in the night sky. It felt like I was part of something bigger, something more than just a single person in a single moment.

I walked until I was tired, until my legs felt like lead. I knew it was time to turn back, to head towards the car. But I didn't want to. I wanted to stay here, in this quiet, beautiful world, for as long as I could.

I took one last look at the night sky, at the stars and the moon. They were so beautiful, so perfect. I felt a sense of awe, a sense of wonder. It was a moment that I would never forget, a moment that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

I turned back, walking the same path I had come from. The snow was still soft under my feet, and the air was still cold. But it felt like I had been to a special place, a place that was just for me. I felt a sense of peace, a sense of contentment.

I got back into the car, the warmth of the engine a welcome relief from the cold. I looked out the window at the night sky, at the stars and the moon. They were still there, still so beautiful. I felt a sense of gratitude, a sense of thankfulness.

I started the car, the engine purring softly. I drove home, the road winding through the dark woods. The snow was still on the ground, and the air was still cold. But I felt like I had been to a special place, a place that was just for me. I felt a sense of peace, a sense of contentment.

I parked the car in front of my house, the headlights illuminating the path. I got out, looking up at the night sky. The stars were still there, still so beautiful. I felt a sense of awe, a sense of wonder. It was a moment that I would never forget, a moment that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

I walked to the front door, the snow crunching under my feet. I unlocked the door, the handle cold to the touch. I stepped inside, the warmth of the house a welcome relief from the cold. I felt a sense of peace, a sense of contentment.

I looked at the clock on the wall, the time showing 11:00 PM. I had been out for hours, but it felt like only minutes. I felt a sense of wonder, a sense of awe. It was a moment that I would never forget, a moment that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

I went to bed, the warmth of the blankets a welcome relief from the cold. I closed my eyes, the stars and the moon still in my mind. I felt a sense of peace, a sense of contentment. It was a moment that I would never forget, a moment that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

illustrate the use of Octave Thanet's first method in handling of characterization - either make your character act just as they would in real life, or else let your readers see what they have done through the eyes of another. The next method that is to be studied is based on an equally important principle - your characters should talk as if they were actually flesh and blood creatures. The importance of this matter cannot be over-emphasized.

Every one of us must recognize the fact that in the world of fiction, just as in real life, unchangeable opinions of a character are formed the moment he opens his mouth to speak.

The outstanding point about Octave Thanet's use of conversation is this: - her people always talk naturally and in their own everyday language, whether it be the dialect of the negro and the poor white trash of the Arkansas plantations, the farmer or laborer of the small village in the Middle West, or the college graduate from Harvard. Frequently, too, she makes use of the German, the French Canadian, and the Irish dialects. Take for instance the following bits of conversation.

Thekla's husband is out of a job and insists on committing suicide. The poor, little German woman worries continually,

"And now I never can any more sleep nights, for you is always maybe git up and do something to yourself. Papa, how can you done so!" ¹

The next quotation requires no explanation - it is
 1. "The Besetment of Kurt Lieders" Stories of a Western Town,
 New York, 1893, p. 31

a little masterpiece of dialect which stands out all by itself.

"Anypody vat calls hisself a laty ought to behave itself like sooch." ¹

As clever as she may be in handling German dialect, Octave Thanet is even more skilled when it comes to negro dialect. No quotation taken from the speech of the negro can illustrate this point more effectively than this one chosen from The Terrors of the Law, the same story that was mentioned once before in connection with that strong-minded character, Sist' Lily Pearl.

" We-all b'en thirstin' an' famishin' fo' a good ol' time revival. But enjured ontwel one day de glory come on Br'er Pope, an' he hollered, - tryin' to lif' us all up - Amen! Amen! Let de sinner quit sinnin' an' he shall be saved! An'dat ar woman she call out, "Yes, let 'im quit sinnin'. Let him quit sellin' of aigs to do sto' w'en he don't be keeping only one hen! Dat ar remark incinerated false an' wicked notions about Unc' Alick Pope, who lives nigh the Cunnel's checken-yard." ²

How has it been possible for Octave Thanet thus so faithfully to reproduce the language of the people about whom she wrote? As we examine the craftsmanship of her work, it becomes evident that such a power could have been gained only after a most thorough study of every part of the individual speech - a study of mannerisms, of "pet" words, of

1. "The Cabinet Organ", The Missionary Sheriff, N.Y. 1989, p. 88

2. "Terrors of the Law", Century, Vol. 68, p. 258.

unusual uses of prepositions, and of misused parts of verbs. This supposition is very much strengthened by the fact that Octave Thanet is a woman of means, a philanthropist, a scholar, and a polished woman of society. Certainly it is highly improbable that a woman of this type could really know and understand the language of the lower classes without some such diligent study.

Thus far, we have discussed but two of the three methods which Octave Thanet has used in her handling of the problem of characterization - two methods that can be summed up in one short rule - make your characters act and make them talk. The third method is somewhat different for it does not deal with the actual character of the individual which she is describing - the manner in which he would respond to given situations, or the things he might think, or do, or say, but instead, it has to do with the details of his appearance - his clothes and his features - even the way he smiles. These details need especially apt, well expressed, neatly turned phrases. How delighted we are when we discover that Octave Thanet's stories are full of them. Not only does she know how to coin these distinctive phrases, but she knows exactly what details to make them about. How well these phrases find good illustration in such paragraphs as the following:

"Martha took life on the broad side, laughing when she was merry, weeping when she was sad, and sputtering vigorously when in wrath." ¹

1. "The Non-combatant" The Heart of Toil, N.Y., 1989, p. 115.

Need attention be called to those two phrases, "took life on the broad side", and "sputtering vigorously"? Surely they stand forth upon their own feet and claim recognition.

We may laugh at Octave Thanet's portrait of Martha, but we fall in love with Mother Emeritus. "She was soothing the child on her broad shoulder where I know not how many babies had found comfort." ¹

With a few broad strokes, Mother Emeritus has been painted in as clear and definite and final a fashion. Sometimes, as in the quotation just made, Octave Thanet makes use of one carefully formed, artistically fashioned sentence to produce the desired effect. Again she uses a single carefully chosen adjective or adverb. Take for instance a phrase like this, "She was daintily neat." ² The words "daintily neat" do far more than tell about her clothes, they give us a key to the very personality of the girl.

Even more notable, perhaps, than her skill in coining excellent descriptive phrases is her ability in selecting the most vivid and significant details which stand out before the eyes of the reader. This power finds good illustration in the following example. An engineer in describing the president of the road,

"His overcoat was a flying, way it always had, no matter what the weather." ³

We remember this man for the reason that he, as

1. "Mother Emeritus", Stories of a Western Town, N.Y. 1893, p. 142
2. "Mother Emeritus", Stories of a Western Town, N.Y. 1893, p. 137
3. "A Moment of Clear Vision", Heart of Toil, N.Y. 1898, p. 115

so many of us here in real life, has some most noticeable peculiarity of dress. The next example that has been chosen does not emphasize any detail of dress, but instead stresses the cold, steady gaze of the eyes.

"Pretty seemed too small a word for such a personage, yet 'beautiful' conveys a hint of tenderness; and Mrs. Von Arno's face, it might be because of those steady eyes - was rather a hard face, notwithstanding the soft pink and white of her skin, and even the dimples that dented her cheek when she smiled." ¹

In the next quotation, note that three especially good descriptive points are made - one in each sentence.

A bishop is being described, "'So English', the young ladies of the Highland Park Hotel used to whisper to each other, admiring him. Perhaps this is the time to mention that the Bishop was a widower" and "portly as a bishop should be." ²

The facts stressed that the Bishop is "so English", that he is a widower, and that he is just as "portly as a bishop should be", are exactly the right details to emphasize in describing this worthy ecclesiast.

After this brief consideration of Octave Thanet's craftsmanship in delineating characters, we are justified, perhaps, in gathering the following conclusions:

First, she makes her characters act. Sometimes she

1. "A Communist's Wife", Knitters in the Sun, Boston, 1893, p. 175

2. "The Bishop's Vagabond", Knitters in the Sun, Boston, 1893, p. 50.

she allows us to see the character himself, again, we hear of him from the lips of others.

Second, her people talk in their own everyday language.

Third, she possesses not only the ability to coin especially apt, well-expressed, and neatly turned descriptive phrases, but she also has a knowledge of exactly which details should be chosen for emphasis.

V PLOT

Scarcely less interesting than the study of character will, we believe, be the study of the technique of plot. We will look at the plots Octave Thanet has given us from two points of view, glancing first at their general characteristics and then making a more thorough examination of the individual parts of their structure.

When we take up our study of Octave Thanet's plots as a whole, we find two most noteworthy characteristics.

1. The impression which they give of absolute realism.

2. Their power to hold the reader's attention to the story, for the stories sake alone.

To take up the matter of realism first: it would seem that Octave Thanet has ever recognized that life is replete with unusual situations, situations brimming over with dramatic power, incidents fairly spoiling for the telling. A writer who can take these everyday happenings and present them in such a way that the eyes of the everyday man are forced to note the wealth of material about him in his own little humdrum world is an artist. How many of us have not at some time or other watched the development of a Tommy who grew to be a Thomas, a lad who by means of hard work became a famous legislator, but who for a time seemed about to make the fatal mistake of being ashamed of his poorly educated, old-fashioned father and mother. And I am sure

that every one of us has seen enacted the near-tragedy of a Mother - the fate of a kind sympathetic soul who was about to be moved from her old home in the noisy flat because an impulsive but well-meaning daughter thought she was working too hard taking care of her neighbors, when in reality, to such women as Mother Emeritus, life without neighbors would not be worth living. And yet how few people recognize the fact that these incidents possess the power of ~~making~~ a real appeal to the mind of the reader until Octave Thanet puts them in story form? Indeed, she so frequently uses just this type of material - incidents taken from every day life - that one critic has even charged her with having come from the East to Davenport, Iowa, and to Clover Bend, Arkansas, to stand as an outsider taking notes so that she might later display her most curious collection of characters. Perhaps there are a few readers who might agree with this critic and feel that in her stories they were being conducted through a most interesting museum of odd and unusual characters, but the writer believes that they are few in number.

Of course, it may be true that some of us have never seen enacted in real life the story of the quaint old couple, "who in dreams became not older." or that of the rather pathetically humorous old man in the Strike at Glassocks, the man who thought that he and his wife were having a regular strike with "all the trimmings." And yet, if we do not know of characters and incidents such as these that have found development in Octave Thanet's stories, we

can but wish we did. Then again, it is hardly probable that many of us have met a Demming, the man who so firmly believed in the theory that a living is best earned by strategic means, that he even staged a fake funeral for his wife in order to gain the bishop's sympathy. But in spite of our lack of familiarity with such scenes and people, we are, nevertheless, thoroughly impressed with Miss French's ability to make them seem not only real but highly interesting, and well they might seem so, for if a statement of a critic writing for Davenport paper is to be regarded as authentic, these stories were built around actual characters taken from real life; Demming was the result of a combination of two southern characters that Octave Thanet had known and "Headlights" figured in a newspaper story. Why is it that we like to feel that the stories of the "Captured Dream", Mother Emeritus, Demming and all these others are really of this earth and not creations of some one's vivid imagination? Surely it is because to most of us, this "little old world" in which we live, is an extremely interesting place. It holds unlimited story possibilities, and we are interested in everything that happens here. A writer, who can portray these incidents of everyday life in an understanding way, will always find a place in the hearts of men. Thus it is that we may count realism as one of the most valuable characteristics with which any story could be endowed.

As the second general characteristic of Octave Thanet's plots we may note that they have the power to hold the

attention of the reader for the stories sake alone. This statement finds verification in the fact that it is possible to study every short story that Octave Thanet has ever had published and yet not be wearied by any sameness of plot motive. True it is that many of her stories are slightly melodramatic - in a few cases sadly so - but in spite of all this we must admit that she holds our interest - she has a tale to relate, we listen. Sometimes she does this by giving us a simple little love tale, such as The Captured Dream; again the story is humorous, as in The Terrors of the Law; or it may be simply charming, such as the attraction for us in The Strike at Glasscocks.

To illustrate this general characteristic of plot interest, the following two examples may be cited: Harry Losing, and When Abbylonia Surrendered. They are given without further comment, for surely even the bare outline of these narratives is sufficient to illustrate the power of Octave Thanet's stories to attract the interest of the reader.

In the tale of Harry Losing, we have a left-handed man who has tried to become right-handed. One Sunday in church he absentmindedly puts his hand into the wrong pocket, and instead of taking out a two dollar bill, as he thought, he pulls out two hundred dollars. Blissfully unconscious of what he has done, he puts the sum in the church collection. What those two hundred dollars mean to the visiting minister who finally receives them is told in

an extremely interesting way.

The second example, When Abbylonia Surrendered is a most unusual story for it mingles not only something of the tragic and pathetic, but even of the ridiculous. This is the story: Abbylonia Eddings's husband is not the type of man who should attempt to be a preacher; but forced into the work by the lifelong desires of his parents, he decides to do his best. Abbylonia writes his sermons for him. After preaching her impassioned words again and again, he "sees the light" and begins to feel that he is living a lie, and he then decides that he must tell the truth to his people. Abbylonia tries to keep him from it for she cannot bear the thought of drudging on the farm - their only alternative. For once he is obdurate. Life doesn't seem worth living, and so she decides to commit suicide. Octave Thanet then tells us, in her most sympathetic way and yet comically tragic way, how a big fat woman, a little sticky varnish, and a hot day, averted the catastrophe.

From a brief survey of the general characteristics of Octave Thanet's plots, we now pass to a more detailed study of the various parts of their structure - the beginnings with their attractiveness, the climaxes, with their dramatic power, and the endings with their final artistic touches. Let us begin with the beginnings. As we glance through the several volumes of her short stories, stopping to note each opening paragraph, we perceive that practically never has she made it unattractive. She shows a sunning mastery of

the most effective methods of introducing a story - sometimes it is by conversation, a type of opening paragraph that is attractive in itself from the very appearance of the printed page; oftentimes it is a striking bit of local color description; again it is by some little statement which piques the curiosity, or by some clever little device that makes one smile.

A single example has been chosen to illustrate each of these devices.

The first quotation has been taken from Mrs. Finlay's Elizabethan Chair and illustrates the use of conversation. Note how those few words in quotation marks break up the sentence form and attract the attention of the eye. Note too, how the need of an introduction is eliminated. The reader is plunged right into the heart of the story and an added sense of realism is the result.

"What do you want?" said Mr. Finlay. A sunbeam reflected from the burnished silver of the urn, flicked athwart his face, to emphasize his smile."¹

The next example illustrates the use of description in an opening paragraph. In one short, simple sentence, it presents a most effective background for the coming political conference.

"The gas jet placed unsheltered above Thompson's head, painted the silhouettes of three men on the white plastered wall."²

1. "Mrs. Finlay's Elizabethan Chair", Knitters in the Sun, Boston, 1893, p. 97

2. "Moment of Clear Vision", Heart of Toil, New York, 1898, p.85

For a sentence which will pique the curiosity, the next quotation seems a most fitting illustration. The world having been so steeped in jokes about mother-in-laws, we ~~can~~ instinctively read on to discover what happened.

"Frank Mallory was fond of his mother-in-law." ¹

And the last example! One simply cannot help smiling; one does not need any very astute sense of intuition to know what has happened. A young man comes out of a building, he sees the sign, "Office of Woman's Suffrage". He strikes it into the mud with his cane and growls, "'You be hanged,' which indeed, was exactly what the sign needed." ²

That Octave Thanet's beginnings are attractive, has been made quite evident by the illustrations just noted. The second point that should be made concerning her opening paragraphs is based upon the old, old fact that, "First impressions are strongest," and so she makes most clever use of this principle in introducing her characters. Not only does she secure priority of impression, but she gains in actual time for through a use of this device the action gains great impetus. In the following quotation, she has even made use of the very first sentence of the story to introduce her central character.

"Sheriff Wickliff leaned out of his office window, the better to watch the boy soldiers march down the street..... The jail is as plain as a sledge-hammer.....but during Sheriff

1. "Slave to Duty", Slave to Duty, Chicago, 1898,

2. "Father Quinlan's Convert", Knitters in the Sun, Boston, 1893
p. 7.

Wickliff's administration, window gardens brightened the grim walls all summer, and crysanthemums and roses blazoned the black bars in winter." ¹

She makes use of this principle of first impressions in many different ways, for example, in the introducing of some certain little incident which is to strike the keynote of her theme, or in emphasizing some certain emotion which is to mark the dominant mood of her story. An illustration of a few words of a song which can affect the tone of a whole story is found in the opening paragraph of The Captured Dream.

An artist is riding along a dusty road. In a cynical, half worldly-wise way, he is thinking of his experiences with love. To him it seems a rather empty delusion, he shrugs his shoulders and begins to whistle. Octave Thanet gives us the words of this little air, and these form our first definite impression of the story.

"In dreams she grows not older
The lord of dreams among,
Though all the world wax colder
Though all the songs be sung,
In dreams doth he behold her.
So fair, and kind, and young."

Now to consider that portion of the short story which is defined as its highest point of interest. We realize that

1. "The Missionary Sheriff", The Missionary Sheriff, New York, 1898
2. "The Captured Dream", Book of True Lovers, New York, 1899

this height is best attained by means of a series of carefully chosen events given in climactic sequence. It is obvious that this series of events must be selected with infinite care and that the skill with which this is accomplished will be sufficient to differentiate the work of an artist from that of a mere "hack" writer. Thus it is that in taking up our study of the technique of climax, we will include more material than that portion of a story to which we ordinarily apply the term. Two examples will illustrate the skill with which Octave Thanet selects and organizes those details of action or emotion that will best produce an effective climax. In Beyond the Limit, the first illustration, note how the dominant mood of fear is ever made intense, and yet more intense, until at last the breaking point is reached. The first scene is that of a lynching. A negro has killed a child and the men of the neighborhood burn him at the stake. From the moment that the last agonizing shriek of the victim dies away, we see and feel that Waller, the central character of the story, is haunted with a deadly fear that he has done wrong. Day by day, this terror grows - he no longer eats, he is afraid to sit upon any chair that is not pushed tight against the wall. There seems to be but one thing which can redeem him and that is his love for the village school teacher; but just as he is gathering his courage to go to her for comfort, he learns that she has disappeared. She had lost her position because she had dared to say that the men, of which he was one, had gone beyond the limit in the punishment of the negro. Right on top of this most crushing blow to the

to the conscience stricken man comes the worst cut of all. In a scene that we may truly term the climax, he discovers the children of the village burning a cat at the stake, because as they said, it had killed a bird. To his fear-distorted mind, the whole world seems suddenly possessed of the devil and all this because of a crime in which he himself had participated. Suicide is the only way out.

As we hurry from one scene to another in this story, the emotions that are aroused within us become more and more intense. With the terror stricken man, we come to feel that the burden of his conscience is growing heavier and heavier with every passing event. And then when that awful cry of the tortured cat strikes our ears, with Waller, we too feel that the final blow is more than any human soul can bear. We have been made to run a gamut of the emotion of fear, and the climax is effective because of events that have gone before.

Another example which has been selected to illustrate the use of carefully chosen details leading up to a climax has been taken from Mrs. Finlay's Elizabethan Chair. In this story, we must note a slightly different sequence of detail. Instead of a series of events which steadily rise in the scale of a single emotion, we have a contrast of emotions with a consequent break in our plot curve.

Violet and Johnny have just reached a point where they think themselves and their precious burden quite safe from all the noise and confusion about them, when suddenly the bottom

drops out of their little world; the climax comes as a surprise.

To explain the events which make possible the climax - Mrs. Finlay hates the "stupid, censorious, provincial town" [¶] in which she lives. Her home has always been in New York, and she simply cannot understand the people with whom she now associates. She is exceedingly fond of her husband, and as he wishes her to like the people whom he has known as a boy, she tries to do her best. That is the reason she consents to allow the idol of her heart, a most treasured Elizabethan chair, to be placed upon exhibition in a museum of "art treasurers". Violet Durham promises to make herself personally responsible for the return of the chair. Then comes the dramatic scene of the fire. Here we see Violet and a small youngster who adores her, attempting to save the chair. Just as they are breathing a long sigh of relief, in quick, sharp contrast we are given the finishing touch to the scene, we know as climax - they have saved the wrong chair.

Now to most of us, the loss of a single chair would not be a matter of life or death, but so skillfully has Octave Thanet made us feel the strained relations which have existed between Mrs. Finlay and the provincial, yet kindly hearted townspeople, that, together with Johnny and Violet, we gasp with dismay. Again we feel that such an effective climax could have been made possible only by a very care-

fully chosen sequence of events.

This discussion of the story of Mrs. Finlay's Elizabethan Chair, suggests another interesting feature in the technique of plot, and that is the dramatic power with which it is richly endowed. Note this description taken from the above mentioned story.

"....he ran into the smoke. Horrible smoke it was, - dense, blinding, stifling. His eyes were stung; his ears stunned; the murky air seemed to roll all about him. But he saw the white tarpaulin through his smoky tears, and staggered up to it....The whole street brightened into a kind of lurid gayety. The flames leaped up in the museum windows. Up-stairs, where the fire had started, they were all aglow. In the street, the boys were shouting, the water splashing, the firemen swearing, and apparently everybody ordering somebody else to do something....Violet's plight was deplorable. Little streams of water drained from her soaked skirts; her hat was crushed into a shapeless bunch, through an unintentional collision with a hook and ladder company. She had a great bruise on her cheek, and a never explained scratch on her nose." 1

This scene just quoted, is so skillfully worked out, that it may truly be called the "point of the highest interest" Other scenes showing her ability to handle the problem of climax - scenes equally effective in dramatic power, are the train wreck scene from The Bishop's Vagabond, the fire

1. "Mrs. Finlay's Elizabethan Chair", Knitters in the Sun, Boston, 1893, p. 123.

scene from The Ogre of Ha Ha Bay, and the battle with the Indians in His Duty.

From the study of the climax in Octave Thanet's stories we come to the final point in plot - the ending. It is the ending of a story which leaves the last definite impression upon the mind of the reader. To make this last definite impression, however, it is not necessary that the closing scene be startling or even elaborately detailed, for as Miss Albright says,

"Simplicity as well as brevity contribute to the intensity of the ending."¹

She then goes on to formulate this definition.

"The conclusion is the solving of all problems, the termination of the narrative itself, and the artistic severing of all relations between the narrator and reader."²

Again she says,

"No conclusion/^{should}stand in need of explanatory after-statements."³

Let us now choose an ending from one of Octave Thanet's stories and using that as a fair representative of many others that might be selected, let us analyze it from the point of view of technique alone. The following scene from The Bishop's Vagabond is especially worthy of note.

In our discussion of character, we have once before

1. The Short Story, Albright, Evelyn
2. The Short Story, Albright, Evelyn
3. The Short Story, Albright, Evelyn

mentioned Demming, the Bishop's vagabond, and so we know something of his past history - his laziness, his absolute worthlessness. How startled we are in the dramatic scene of the train wreck, to find that it is this same worthless Demming who is risking his life to save the Bishop pinned beneath the wreckage. The Bishop is scarcely hurt, but Demming is so badly injured that after an operation, he begins to sink rapidly. The ensuing death-bed scene forms the conclusion of the story. The first standard which Miss Albright has given us is this - the conclusion must solve all problems. In this last scene of the story under consideration, this is exactly what Octave Thanet does. In the first place, the love story threading the whole in minor key is brought to a happy conclusion. Demming tells Louise, "Mabbe you done what you done, not knowin' yo' own min'; - laws that's jes girls, - an' I wants you ter know jes what kin' o' feller he is." ¹ And then he tells her that it was Talboys who actually saved the bishop. The real problem, however, that confronted the author in drawing together the threads of her conclusion was not the solving of this love story, it was the problem of what to do with Demming. If he had not been fatally injured could he have been presented so that the reader would not feel a sense of disappointment - an anti-climax as it were? Here we have this lazy, shiftless creature raised for the time being above the sordid level of his former life. After that, what reader is there who would wish to see him return

1. "The Bishop's Vagabond", Knitters in the Sun, Boston, 1893, p. 92

to his same old ways? Demming himself knows that such would be his fate, for, when the bishop asks him, "Shall I pray for you, Demming?" this is his answer:

"Jes as you please, Bishop, I ain't noways particler . I reckon God a' mighty knows I'd be th' same old Demming ef I could get up, an' I don' mean ter make no purtenses."¹

Octave Thanet understands our feeling about the vagabond returning to his old life, and so she solves the problem with a most artistically finished scene of Demming's death.

"So speaking, Demming closed his eyes weakly, and the Bishop knelt by the bedside. After a while, the wife stretched forth her toil-worn hand and took her husband's. She thought she was aware of a weak pressure. But when the prayer ended, there came no Amen. Demming was gone where prayer may only faintly follow; nor could the Bishop ever decide how far his vagabond had joined in his petitions. Such doubts, however, did not prevent his cherishing an assured hope that the man who died for him was safe, forever. The Bishop's theology, like that of most of us yielded sometimes to the demands of the occasions."²

This final scene, a conclusion closen as a fair representative of Octave Thanet's work, most certainly fulfills all the requirements that have been made for an effective ending. It terminates the story itself, it finishes an artistic severing of all relations between

1. "The Bishop's Vagabond," Knitters in the Sun, Boston, 1893
p. 95

2. "The Bishop's Vagabond", Knitters in the Sun, Boston, 1893
p. 96

reader and narrator, and by means of its simplicity and brevity, it gives a valued touch of intensity.

The last sentence in the above quotation suggests another interesting feature of Octave Thanet's own individual fashion of ending her short stories. And this is the cleverly worded, cleverly stated last sentence with which she so often gives a final artistic touch to her conclusions. From The Bishop's Vagabond we take this most noteworthy sentence, "The Bishop's theology, like that of most of us, yielded, sometimes, to the demands of the occasion."¹ Similarly, we find this in The Missionary Sheriff: "The youngest reporter never heard the details of the Clark mystery, but no doubt he made quite as good a story as if he had known the truth."² And this, "Nor has she ever changed her opinions on that point; neither, so far as it is known, has William Bailey changed his."³

Even as they stand alone, those sentences are interesting - how much more so are they, when, viewed in the light of all that has gone before, they give us a last final impression of the story. Surely no more artistic conclusion could be desired. The last point in our discussion of conclusions has to do with Octave Thanet's use of clever device. This is the custom of mentioning some most noticeable detail of action or character at the beginning, holding

1. "The Bishop's Vagabond", Knitters in the Sun, Boston, 1893, p. 96

2. "The Next Room", The Missionary Sheriff, N.Y., 1898, p.216

3. "The Communists Wife", Knitters in the Sun, Boston, 1893, p. 200

it in reserve throughout the main body of the story, and then bringing it forth in the very last paragraphs. Through this device we gain an added impression of unity - of the close-knit structure of the whole. In the tale of "Ma' Bowlin", we have the story of a little girl whose mind seems dulled. When this child is clad in her new dress she repeats again and again, "Thar, now, Ma' Bowlin'; thar's yo' new gowned. Mus' be keerful." We are made to feel with Ma' that the dress is a matter of great importance. Then the child is lost, and for two days she is missing. We forget all about the new dress. In the very last scene where Ma' at last comes home we are again reminded of the dress in a most effective way.

"Laws!" sniffed the widow from Georgia, "Ef the critter ain't in her petticoats!" Then came Ma' Bowlin's proud moment. She had her bundle tight clasped in her little arms, and now she undid it, displaying the brilliant frock. "Maw tole Ma' Bowlin', naw naw mud hit, nawnaw mus hit! Ma' Bowlin's new gownd!"¹

These two quotations, which begin and close the story, are made to stand out in the eyes of the reader, thus knitting the two portions of the story most firmly together.

In The Captured Dream, a similar device is employed. Only in this case it is a song that the artist sings as he

1. "Ma' Bowlin'", Knitters in the Sun, Boston, 1893, p. 238

wheels along the dusty road. We hear it as he enters; it is the last sound we note as he moves into the distance. But oh, the world of difference that exists in the spirit behind the two! In the first, the artist is cynical - in a half sneering way he thinks that love is but a delusion - only the man who does not win his love is really happy, for he alone can retain his dreams - reality kills all hopes and ideals. In a single afternoon the song takes on an entirely new meaning. The artist is a different man. He has met the little old lady, and the owner of "his captured dream". The whole world has been changed for him; life seems worth while; love is not a delusion, but the truest reality. What more artistic conclusion could ever be devised than these words sung in a thoughtful, serious way?¹

The foregoing study of the general characteristics of plot structure emphasizes these points:

1. Her story-telling power in handling realities loses nothing in her conclusions. They fulfill completely the requirements for a good ending.

2. She possesses the power to form especially noteworthy last sentences - sentences that leave a most agreeable impression with the reader.

3. She understands the use of clever devices to bring about a sense of unity in her stories.

1. Quotation made on p. 40.

VI ETHICAL PURPOSE

The study of plot with all its various phases of beginnings, climax, and conclusion is interesting, but at the same time it suggests another problem just as well worth while - the problem of ethical purposes. What were Octave Thanet's reasons for writing? Was it for her own pleasure or for financial reasons? Does she have any firmly grounded altruistic principle as a basis for her work? If she tells of the problems of the business world, has she any practical knowledge on which to base her statements? The best method to use in discovering an answer to these questions, perhaps, is to seek for some illuminating statement from Octave Thanet herself. For example, the next sentence to be quoted contains a world of meaning; it gives us an insight not only into the type of stories that she might write, but it reveals her true self as well. "I thought they (her stories) might aid the people in whose cause I was interested."¹ Again she says, "Truth is what I seek above all things else. I want to tell my story as it really is, and describe things and people as they really are."² In this article the author again quotes Octave Thanet, this time referring to financial matters.

"I sent one story at a time to the Century, and the editor suggested that I would be wise to confine myself to

1. Current Literature, Vol. 28, p. 143

2. Little Pilgrimages among the Women Who Have Written Famous Books, Boston, 1902, p. 168

short stories. I cannot say that I wanted to altogether, but I realized that I might make from one hundred dollars to three hundred dollars a year writing on social and economic questions, and as I enjoy spending rather more money than I receive as dividends from an iron mill, I decided to take his advice."¹

If a reader were given those three quotations and were asked to form an opinion as to the type of story which Octave Thanet might write, surely his judgment would be this. She would write most realistic stories about actual people and actual events, but the whole would be permeated by a sense of her personality as it finds expression in her own sympathetic interpretation of life. She would not be a visionary writer, but rather one of calm, sane ideals - no writer who keeps in mind the "almighty dollar" can fly too high in the clouds. Those of us who have read most of her stories will recognize this judgment as correct. We will, however, go one step further - we will note and appreciate her realistic and sympathetic interpretations of life, but we will also recognize the presence of an underlying problem. We will be cognizant of the fact that Octave Thanet is ever seeking to make people understand each other - is ever striving to help destroy that lack of understanding which exists between the rich and the poor, the industrious and the idle, the educated and the uneducated, the guiltless and the guilty. Let us quote some passages which will help strengthen this contention that Octave Thanet actually has this humanitar-

1. Little Pilgrimages among the Women Who Have Written Famous Books, Boston, 1902, p. 163

ian interest - that she is really attempting to lessen the gap that exists between different types of men. It would be difficult to find a passage that does more to obliterate the gulf that lies between an employer and employee than does this next quotation. An employer who is running his mills at a dreadful loss to himself that no man may be thrown out of work, overhears two employees discussing his greed. Cut to the quick to learn that they do not understand the sacrifice he is making, he plods wearily away. Another workman says as he watches him go:

"Lord, I hope he's got somebody home ain't so damfool clumsy as me, and can comfort him a bit for things. Like's not he'll never be able to buy that house, now; and, next to Jabez, his heart was jest set on it. And he's lost 'em both. And folks think he's doing this to make money! It's a lonesome world!"¹

That story had to do with the business world. In the next we speak of the gap that lies between the guilty and the innocent. We find that the borderland between the two is not as great as we had thought - a very little thing can make us cross from one side to the other. The Judgment of Mrs. Swift is an especially good example of this. In the first part of the story, we have the thin-lipped Mrs. Swift declaring herself as very much opposed to her son's love for Marcia, a girl who has but recently been divorced. She and many of her neighbors believe that Marcia cannot

1. "Conscience of a Business Man", Heart of Toil, N.Y., 1898, p. 215

be guiltless. But before the story ends, we find the tables turned. It is Marcia who saves the righteous Mrs. Swift from utter disgrace, when circumstantial evidence has accused her of stealing a diamond pin. Again and again throughout the story, we are made to feel that the human being does not exist who has a right to look down upon his neighbors as less virtuous than himself.

The next example has bridged the gulf that people who term themselves cultured and refined are accustomed to believe exists between them and others who follow different standards of life. In The Captured Dream, we discover just as wonderful and beautiful a love finding its home among surroundings that many would condemn as atrocious, as we could ever hope to find in the homes of the cultured.

In the last story, The Brothers, we see the sufferings of two men, one in poverty, who loses his wife, the other with riches, who cannot win the love of a woman he adores. We are made to feel that rich and poor alike are only human and that the barrier which has been erected between them is false and should be destroyed.

Thus far in our discussion of ethical purpose, we have taken up the matter from a general point of view and have made no attempt to differentiate the various types of problems. Such a very large portion of her work, however, deals with one special problem, that it deserves mention as a separate division. This division includes all those stories which center about economic problems and labor con-

ditions in the business world. Before beginning our discussion of any specific problem of this group, perhaps it would be well to state that these stories of the business world are not based upon theory, but on a sound, practical knowledge of actual working conditions. Her father and her brothers have been extensive manufacturers and throughout all her life she has been in close contact with the business world.

There is one volume of her short stories that always comes to mind when labor problems are mentioned, and that is the Heart of Toil. It consists of six stories, The Non-Combatant, The Way of an Election, The Moment of Clear Vision, Johnny's Job, The "Scab", and The Conscience of a Business Man. The names themselves are enough to provoke a train of thought about the laboring world.

Two of these stories have been chosen to illustrate Octave Thanet's treatment of this type of problem - one from The Non-Combatant, the other from The Way of an Election.

The first treats of strikes as seen from a really human point of view. All our lives we have read speeches from various laboring men and have heard of battles waged over "scabs", yet how little do we know of the people who suffer most! In the story The Non-Combatant, we see a strike as it really is - a veritable stone dropped in a quiet pool causing endless and ever widening ripples. These ripples in the business world upset the lives not only of the strikers, but also those of endless non-combatants, - in this case, a grocer who had not the heart to refuse "the boys"

their credit even at a time when he knew it spelled ruin for him. Many are the quotations which might have been chosen from this story in bringing home to the reader some idea of the heartaches and disappointments that even a short strike must involve. Only one instance is given here. In its few lines the message of the whole is epitomized.

"No one came into the store. Race looked out on the street and sat drearily coming over his own plight. His heart was like lead. He could look out and see the tidy little yards and the windswept macadam, and the men sitting idly on their steps for the most part, albeit a few were patching up their sheds and fences and some lawnmowers were rattling through the little front yards. A stranger would have noticed only a pretty, shady street, but he saw the empty window where the Jenner's cabinet organ had stood, and he remembered how Ned Mueller had meant to paint the house which stood dingy brown and would wait a long time now for the paint brush. He felt not only his own anxiety and pain, but the smother of all the misery about him."¹

The second story, The Way of An Election, deals with the problem of the political boss among laborers, and paints for us a most realistic picture of the power that a speaker of eloquence can exert over a body of working men. The "Harry" mentioned in the quotation given is the foreman of the foundry, who is more of a thinker than the average workman.

1. "Non-Combatants", Heart of Toil, N.Y. 1898, p. 17

"Harry shook his head He had come to hear what he himself called the 'horse-sense of the situation'. What he heard was a hash of exaggeration and falsehood, gilded platitudes, hysterical wrenchings at the emotions and frantic appeals to the wolfish prejudices of class against class. But how magnificently the orator acted his sorry part! Convincing himself with his molten passion! Swaying himself and his audience in the same breath!"¹

Harry gets so disgusted with the speaker and his overwhelming avalanche of words, that he can contain himself no longer. He rises and within a few moments completely controls a mass of men who were but a moment ago swayed by the passionate words of the first speaker.

Thus it is that by an actual scene with actual speakers we are made to understand the problem of the political boss.

To turn now to a last general survey of the ethical purposes of Octave Thanet, we must note one final point - the matter of the effectiveness of her problem stories. In the first place, they make the desired impression and are effective because she makes no attempt to draw a moral - in fact, none is needed. She paints for us a simple realistic picture and we are left to draw our own conclusions.

This quality of simple realism has eliminated the need for a pointed moral. Octave Thanet interests us in her problem before we realize that the problem is there.

1. "The Way of Election", Heart of Toil, N.Y. 1898, p. 59

By her skillful portrayal of life itself with no hint of an underlying purpose, she puts us in sympathy with all manner of men. Her ability to so portray life would seem of itself to place her in the front rank of all short story writers of the present day.

VII AN APPRECIATION

As the writer completes a careful perusal of the last of Octave Thanet's numerous volumes, and laying them aside, tries to formulate definitely and finally his impression of them and their author, involuntarily a smile crosses his face - a one-sided smile, expressive of many things. What power is hers! By the masterful cunning of her pen, she has opened to many of us, channels of interest which have heretofore been unexplored. She has made the land of the canebrake and the village of the Middle West, our own.

That thought of the Middle West suggests another to a mind that is looking back in retrospection o'er his work. Hamlin Garland wrote of this section of the country. Does his work in any way resemble that of Octave Thanet's? Both of them are realists and both of them have a most thorough knowledge of the scenes whereof they wrote, but the difference in the results of their literary labors is most clearly apparent. The one name calls to mind a vast company of weary, worn, stolid faces; the other brings more pleasant thoughts. The people of Octave Thanet are not to be gazed upon with a sympathetic eye that says, "The poor unfortunates!" They are to be regarded as individuals, each endowed with the power of deepest emotion, whether it be of fear, or joy, or love, or sorrow. In every page of her work, we find reflected the sunny disposition and the undaunted courage of a woman

who has explicit faith in the common people - even the most uncouth. So it is that her stories refresh the mind of the reader, while those of Hamlin Garland leave only a sense of depression.

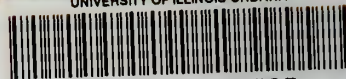
To Octave Thanet it would seem, "The world is so full of a number of things, I am sure we should all be as happy as kings." With her, the word "things" might almost be replaced by the word "people", and yet not miss the mark so very far. Her delight in people, in unusual types of people, calls to the writer's mind these ideas^{to} which she herself has given expression.¹ Her words were to the effect that although she was enough a creature of this growing age to know that the advance of civilization must eventually come, she wished that it would not come too quickly. In other words, she recognizes the fact that the bustling methods of business must necessarily do away with some of the most interesting types of our present day. Gone will be the Bishop's Vagabond, and ended the quiet, contented life of the inland villages throughout the Middle West. In some ways, a sympathetic reader feels that much of Octave Thanet's interest in these quaint, homely people doubtless springs in

from the quiet kindly humor with which she is able to view them and their foibles. At times it is the gentle humor of an Addison as he writes of Sir Roger de Coverly, again it is the delicate whimsical humor of a Lamb in his Essays of Elia. As with them, this humor often finds expression in some cleverly twisted phrase, or in some skillfully emphasized individual trait of character. The

1. Atlantic, Vol. 65, p. 123

reader remembers the sign that was told to be hanged, but wasn't, the man whose overcoat was always flying no matter what the weather, the sturdy back of obstinate old Glasscock fairly bristling in his wrath, and the lazy, shiftless, good-for-nothing Demming. Octave Thanet's kindly yet yet humorous treatment of Demming alone, is sufficient to mark her as a writer possessed of a truly genuine interest in people as people. She views with kindly tolerance their whims and prejudices, and is able to catch their oddities in the meshes of a skillful phrase. To the reader who is attempting to formulate one last definite impression of Octave Thanet and her work, what a train of ideas those last few words suggest, - her kindly sympathy, her clear penetrating insight into the motives and impulses of the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, her power to catch the face and the spirit of life along the Mississippi in the Middle West and to fix them to canvas. These qualities are but the natural outgrowth of her large, keen, tolerant personality. When we add to this power of sympathetic insight, a mastery of the story teller's art, we can well understand why Octave Thanet is entitled to a secure place among the writers of America's most characteristic form of literature.

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